

For Honda, Peace Corps Helped Shape His Future in Public Service

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Rep. Michael M. Honda, who has been spreading the good word about the Peace Corps for years as a returned volunteer, says it was an experience that helped shape how he reaches out to people as a congressman.

"We were supposed to go in by twos, as partners, so we could sustain each other," the California Democrat told HOH. "But as we were training, we became more and more individual."

Honda served in El Salvador from 1965 to '67, during the program's nascent years.

Of the people who didn't split up and engage villagers, he had this to say: "We found that their Spanish was terrible." And while that wasn't uncommon among volunteers, how they responded went a long way to shaping their experiences on the ground.

"They weren't really forced to engage people on a level where you have to communicate and understand and to be fully accepted into the fabric of the town that you're in," he said of the volunteers who kept to themselves.

Though he didn't speak a lick of Spanish when he arrived in El Salvador, today Honda uses what he learned of the language to reach out to Latino constituents and make appearances on Univision and other Spanish-language outlets.

Honda said that when he first arrived, the villagers he was to work with were surprised he was Asian, yet still American.

"They asked me if I knew Marilyn Monroe. All I could say was, 'I wish,'" he said.

Helping promote a better understanding of Americans is the second goal in the Peace Corps' three-tier mission, besides doing service for underprivileged foreigners and learning about their culture. Today, more than 210,000 people have volunteered in 139 countries with the Peace Corps, according to the agency's website. A recent exhibit in the Russell Senate Office Building's Rotunda showcased the federal program's work in South Korea in the '60s, '70s and early '80s.

A legislative assistant to Honda, Helen Chung, is Korean by background and served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Georgia and recommended he see the exhibit, he said.

"She made sure I knew about it," he said with a laugh. "I [had] to go see it or else she'll quit."